

Stay Healthy with Diabetes

High blood sugar levels can damage nerves, blood vessels, and organs in the body without you knowing. Keeping your blood sugars, blood pressure and cholesterol levels in a healthy range will help to prevent damage. This handout describes how diabetes can affect your body.

Eyes

High blood sugars can damage the small blood vessels in the eyes. Damage to blood vessels in the retina (back of the eye) is called retinopathy. Diabetes also raises the risk of cataracts, glaucoma, and fluid build-up in the back of the eye, called macular edema. These problems can cause vision loss and lead to blindness.



Some people notice blurry vision, “floaters,” poor night vision, faded colors, or a loss of vision. There may be no sign of changes at first. Keep your eyes healthy by managing your blood sugars and having dilated eye exams at least yearly.

Kidneys

High blood sugar and high blood pressure can damage the small blood vessels in the kidneys. The kidneys start to leak very small proteins called microalbumin. Tests can be done to look for these proteins in your urine and to check how well your kidneys are filtering your blood. Kidney disease is called nephropathy. It can lead to kidney failure and dialysis.



Keep your kidneys healthy by managing your blood sugars and blood pressures. Eat healthy by lowering your sodium intake and including fruits and vegetables.

Nerves

Neuropathy is damage to the nerves from high blood sugar. It can cause pain, numbness, tingling, and muscle weakness in the hands, legs, and feet. Nerves in the heart, bladder, digestive system, and sexual organs may also be affected.

Heart

Heart attack and stroke risk are higher when high blood sugar levels cause damage to the large and small blood vessels. High blood pressure, high cholesterol levels, and smoking increase the risk even more.



Poor Circulation

Loss of blood supply to the legs and feet can lead to problems with healing and infection. Sores that do not heal can lead to amputation.

Oral Health

Gum disease and other mouth problems such as tooth decay, infections, changes in taste, and dry mouth are more likely. High blood sugar levels increase the amount of sugar in your saliva. This allows bacteria to grow. An infection in the mouth can also raise blood sugar levels.



Some people have swollen, tender, or bleeding gums. Others have no signs of gum disease. Keep your mouth healthy by brushing your teeth and gums at least twice per day and floss at least daily. Get cleanings/exams twice a year. Call your dentist with the first signs of problems.

Sexual Problems

Men may experience impotence, ejaculation problems and low testosterone. Women may have problems with arousal, vaginal lubrication, ability to orgasm, and infections.

What You Can Do to Lower Your Risk			
What You Need	Reason	Goal	Last result/ Date
A1C test (Every 3-6 months)	Know if you are meeting your blood sugar goals	< 7% for most people Your goal: _____	
Urine albumin /creatinine ratio (UACR) and eGFR (1-2 times per year)	Check the health of your kidneys.	UACR < 30 mg/g eGFR > 60	
Cholesterol test (Every 5 years or more often as needed)	If cholesterol levels are not in goal range, discuss changes that could help reduce risk of stroke, heart attack, kidney, and eye problems.	Total cholesterol: < 200 Triglycerides: < 150 LDL: < 70 for those with heart disease risk factors; < 55 for those with heart disease HDL: > 40 for men; > 50 for women	
Blood pressure check (Every visit)	If blood pressure is not in goal range, discuss changes that could help reduce risk of stroke, heart attack, kidney, and eye problems.	Less than 130/80 mmHg	
Clinic appointment (Every 6 months or more often if needed)	Discuss your concerns, exam results, blood sugar levels, alcohol intake, smoking and exercise habits.	Set or revise personal health goals	
Dilated eye exam (Every 1-2 years)	Check for small blood vessel damage in the back of the eyes.	Prevent eye problems that can affect vision	
Dental exam (Every 6 months)	Check for tooth or gum problems	Prevent gum problems and tooth decay	
Foot exam (Every visit)	Check nerve function, circulation, and any nail or skin problems.	Prevent injury and amputation	
Vaccinations (As needed; ask provider)	Protect against illness	Prevent high blood sugar levels due to illness	
Diabetes education and support (At diagnosis, yearly, and with any new issues)	Learn how to stay healthy with diabetes; help you set personal health goals, build knowledge and confidence, and provide support	Attend a class taught by diabetes care and education specialists; include family or support persons to learn with you	

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 5/2023. University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing HF#4814